

American Dream as a Key Factor of Social Mobility in the USA

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ABSTRACT

The authors of the article present the results of the research which was undertaken from year 2005 to 2020 among the American citizens. The aim of the survey was to define the main American aspirations which build up the essence of the American dream, to study the transformations of the key values and find out their impact on social mobility.

Keywords: *Social mobility, Upward mobility, Concept, Association experiment*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we are living in the period of the Fourth Industrial Revolution which provides us with a wide range of new opportunities, challenges and changes. These changes result in new economic, social and political systems. The society has faced up to a great fusion of advances in artificial intelligence, robotics, genetic engineering, quantum computing, and many other technologies. All these modern products are being developed to make people to earn and spend quicker and much more. An industrial world aims at an increase in production and consumption which affect the standard of living, aspirations, values and believes of people all over the world. These innovations transform businesses and people, shape new ideas.

The Roots of the American Dream

The problem of social mobility has always been a core issue for many scientists in the field of economy, sociology and marketing, particularly in the United States of America.

An individual's chances in life of any person are definitely determined by the starting point such as socio-

economic status at birth, the place of birth, education and a system of values. Achieving higher levels of social mobility is a crucial element of the long-term benefit of all economies and societies all over the world. It is significant to provide policies and businesses which can ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to achieve their potential.

The United States of America is the country where the improvement of the standard of living and upward mobility has always been considered to be the idea of the American dream. Financial success is a key concept on which the American society was built on. The first immigrants went to the new land in search of the opportunity to change their life for the better. The very idea of social mobility was a key concept of the society. The new settlers came to the land having equal opportunities and a strong desire to work hard which was a must simply to survive on a new unknown territory. Their dominant religion definitely played a crucial role too. It became a further platform for the construction of a capital society and their system of values and believes. Protestantism taught them to serve the God, to work hard for the God, which later turned into the work for yourself. Success became the result of hard work and the representation of the

service to the God. Gradually the service to the God and the service to yourself blended into one concept resulted in some material components of the American Dream.

“For many in both the working class and the middle class, upward mobility has served as the heart and soul of the American Dream, the prospect of ‘betterment’ and to ‘improve one’s lot’ for oneself and one’s children much of what this country is all about. ‘Work hard, save a little, send the kids to college so they can do better than you did, and retire happily to a warmer climate’ has been the script we have all been handed.” — Lawrence Samuel [1].

There is another point of view on the essence of the American Dream which emphasizes not the wealth but freedom in a very broad sense of meaning. It can be proved by the very motivation of the first settlers – to be free from the pressure of their motherland’s policy. The basic document for the formation of the American Dream was Declaration of Independence, created by America’s founding fathers. It says two key things that are largely responsible for shaping what the classic American Dream is. The declaration says that “all men are created equal” and that each man/woman has the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

“The American Dream’ has always been about the prospect of success, but 100 years ago, the phrase meant the opposite of what it does now. The original ‘American Dream’ was not a dream of individual wealth; it was a dream of equality, justice and democracy for the nation. The phrase was repurposed by each generation, until the Cold War, when it became an argument for a consumer capitalist version of democracy” [2].

In the XVIII-XIX centuries the United States experienced an economic growth which greatly strengthened their belief in their country and equal opportunities. Pragmatism becomes the philosophy of the United States. An active, energetic and enterprising person who knows how to use any chance and realize any opportunity comes to the fore, and the development of market relations further enhances this tendency. The core of the American character is the belief that everyone is given equal opportunity and everyone can fulfill their potential.

“A happy way of living that is thought of by many Americans as something that can be achieved by anyone in the U.S. especially by working hard and becoming successful”[3].

2. MOTIVATION RESEARCH IN 2005

In 2005 we started a study of the social mobility issue in the United States of America to find out the attitude of the Americans towards this problem and observe the tendencies and changes which are closely connected with economic and social conditions. 175 citizens of the United States aged from 25 to 45 were brought into the

study. The respondents were given a questionnaire with let them evaluate their chances for upward mobility. Such questions were necessary to understand how motivated the people were in their desire to be successful, to improve their standard of living and to work hard for that. The following questions were included:

1. How do you estimate your chances to be financially successful?
2. Comparing to the period of thirty years ago, how do you evaluate the opportunities for climbing up the social ladder today?
3. How well will your children be compared to today?
4. How do you rate your standard of living compared to that of your parents at the same age?
5. How do you estimate your chances to raise your social status compared to Europe?

In 2005 most Americans were positive about their chances of climbing up the social ladder. The results showed that 34% of Americans believed that they had a chance to succeed, and 11% were sure that the chances were high enough, 20% believed that such opportunities became much more, compared to the period thirty years ago, 15% were sure that the well-being of their children would grow, compared to today, 20% believed their standard of living was much higher than the level of their parents at the same age. Americans believed that, compared to the European countries, it was much easier to improve their well-being in the United States. This was the opinion of 46% of the respondents. Interestingly, the results of the Social Mobility Survey conducted by the Boston Federal Reserve Bank, the Chicago Federal Reserve Fund, the University of California, and the Bureau of Labor Statistics suggested opposite data. Compared to the 70s, the chances and opportunities not only not increased, but significantly decreased.

Another interesting result of the study is the fact that the level of mobility in the United States in 2005 was not higher than in Britain or France, and it was lower than in Canada and some Scandinavian countries. According to the absolute majority one of the main components of the concept of success for the Americans was their unshakable belief that everyone was given a chance, and in order to realize it, you needed to work hard.

“A lot of Americans think the U.S. has more social mobility than other western industrialized countries. This makes it abundantly clear that we have less...Your circumstances at birth—specifically, what your parents do for a living—are an even bigger factor in how far you get in life than we had previously realized. Generations of Americans considered the United States to be a land of opportunity.”[4]

3. ASSOCIATION EXPERIMENT OF SUCCESS CONCEPT IN 2005

The second part of the research in 2005 was an associative experiment among the same respondents. The essence of the experiment was that the respondents were given a stimulus word, to which they had to respond with the first word that came to their mind. The word SUCCESS was given as the stimulus keyword. The participants in the experiment were the same Americans who were born and raised in the United States. The answers received were classified into eight groups according to general semantic features:

Group 1 - bringing goals, dreams to the end (15%)

Group 2 - good work (18%)

Group 3 - a good family, friends (20%)

Group 4 - serving God (3%)

Group 5 - material well-being (23%)

Group 6 - happiness, life satisfaction (7%)

Group 7 - moral obligations to oneself (3%)

Group 8 - balance in personal and professional life (11%)

For our research, the phrases included in the first, third and sixth groups were of particular interest, since those answers have transformed greatly within 15 years. The first group included phrases that were associated with the implementation of the plan, the achievement of the set goals. Among the allocated units there were such as: realizing what you want, striving your best to achieve it, accomplishing your goals and dreams; to pursue a goal such as starting a business, or studying for a new profession then success would be obtaining that goal, calculated on the basis of the expected outcome and results; to achieve the main purpose of my intentions; reached the highest potential, or even surpassing one's goals.

The third group included phrases expressing associations with a friendly and prosperous family life, the presence of good friends: being surrounded by loving people, providing for my family, living comfortable with a family and friends you love, maintaining good family/friend relationships, doing something prosperous towards you and your family, to have a happy close family etc.

It is reasonable to note the fact that Americans inextricably linked success with a happy family and marriage. Forbes magazine annually publishes a list of the richest people who, of course, can be called very successful. After analyzing the lists of the richest Americans between 2000 and 2020, it was found out that 87% of all people mentioned are married and have children, and only 2% have divorced. This indicates that a high social status implies both, success in material well-being and in family [5].

The sixth group included was connected with happiness and life satisfaction: being satisfied with your family life, occupation, being happy and fulfilled by whatever path I choose, being satisfied with my both professional/family life.

The third part of the research included a task to answer the question: "What do you mean by SUCCESS?"

A good car was an indicator of success. The very concept of a good car varied and depended on the level of the speaker's financial income. The following lexical units were found among the analyzed text: a car, a car that wouldn't break, a new car, BMW, Audi, Hummer, Mercedes-Benz, 'subluxury' cars.

In terms of social status, an American who is in the middle level of the middle class can consider oneself to be successful. In 2005 a representative of the middle class had certain material values: flat-screen TV, BMW, high-quality goods, cellphone, DVD player.

In order to be and stay in the middle class, you had to work hard.

Your own apartment, a large house with a swimming pool also reflects the financial well-being of the family: a house with a swimming pool, two story colonial, apartment, four-bedroom apartment.

Certain sports and leisure activities are also indicators of financial well-being: cruise, on-onboard ice skating, wall-climbing, golf, tennis, spa, boutique.

4. MOTIVATION REASERCH AND ASSOCIATION EXPERIMENT IN 2020

In 2020 it was decided to conduct the same experiment which had taken place in 2005. The responders were American citizens aged from 25 to 45. They were asked the same the same questions as in 2005. The results of the recent research have shown that Americans have changed their estimation of the opportunities for upward mobility and equality. Life in a free market economy presupposes inequality, but it has become much more than just a side effect of a capital society. Answering the same questions significantly different results were received. Among the respondents 14% of the Americans believe that they have a chance to succeed, and 12 % are sure that the chances are high enough, 14% believe that such opportunities have become much more, compared to the period thirty years ago, 20% are sure that the well-being of their children will grow, compared to today. At the same time 40% believe their standard of living is much higher than the level of their parents at the same age. According to the these results we can state that Americans are rather satisfied with their standard of living.

Here seems to be reasonable to compare the rate of life satisfaction with the index of social mobility in the

United States. According to the Global Mobility Report of 2020 The United States take the 27th position among 82 countries mentioned in the list. The USA Social Mobility index is 70.4 which is lower than in many European and Asian countries such as Germany, France, the UK, Singapore and Japan. The highest social mobility index in 2020 is in Denmark which is 85.2 [6].

The Association Experiment conducted among the same responders with the same stimulus word showed the following results:

Group 1 - bringing goals, dreams to the end (5%)

Group 2 - good work (24%)

Group 3 - a good family, friends (20%)

Group 4 - serving God (1%)

Group 5 - material well-being (12%)

Group 6 - happiness, life satisfaction (17%)

Group 7 - moral obligations to oneself (8%)

Group 8 - balance in personal and professional life (12%)

The difference in the results compared to year 2005 is striking. Moral obligations to oneself happiness and life satisfaction became more important for the respondents. Among the allocated units there were such as: freedom, freedom of choice, happiness, work-life balance, health, big family, steady job, house, long vacation.

It should be noticed that material goods (such as cars, brand new cars, bank accounts, brand clothes, SPA hotels, luxury items) make up a minor part in the results of 2020 which is 13.4%. It was 67.3% in year 2005.

“Theoretically, it is presumably not the higher incomes themselves that drive reductions in SWB (subjective well-being) but the costs associated with them. High incomes are usually accompanied by high demands (time, workload, responsibility, etc.) that might also limit opportunities for positive experiences (e.g., leisure activities). Additional factors may play a role as well, such as an increase in materialistic values, additional material aspirations that may go unfulfilled, increased social comparisons or other life changes in reaction to greater income (e.g., more children, living in more expensive neighborhoods). Importantly, the ill effects of the highest incomes may not just be present when one’s maximum income is finally reached but could also occur in the process of its attainment.”[7]

5. CONCLUSION

The results of the research have shown that nowadays the idea of the American Dream has been reassessed. The main aspirations of the people are not mainly based on the material goods any more. Americans came back to the initial idea of freedom, but now it is not only political

freedom but it is also freedom of choice. “85 percent indicated that ‘to have freedom of choice in how to live’ was essential to achieving the American dream”. [8] The high rate of life satisfaction and income satisfaction influence motivation of the society to change their social status and improve their standard of living which results in a lowering social mobility index. These data can be used in various marketing, investment and financial projects and may provide further awareness of socio-economic development of the society. The economic and social returns from investing in the right mix of social mobility factors are substantial. A new financing model for social mobility is necessary through taxation but must be complemented by a new mix of spending and tailored approaches. Many policies designed to address social mobility require both additional public resources through taxation and a different mix of public spending on the key drivers of social mobility.

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